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ABSTRACT

African American males face numerous challenges to their physical and psychological well-being. This project is a survey of the literature and trends relative to African American males from 1987 to the present. In reviewing the fifteen years since Parham and McDavis published their now famous article on African American men as an endangered species, particular attention is given to the contemporary crisis in criminal justice, education, health, and employment as well as other issues such as stress and identity. Counseling strategies and resources are discussed. (Contains 31 references.) (Author)

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African American Males in Counseling:

Who's Pulling the Trigger Now?

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Abstract

African American males face numerous challenges to their physical and psychological well-being. This project is a survey of the literature and trends relative to African American males from 1987 to the present. In reviewing the fifteen years since Parham and McDavis published their now famous article on African American men as an endangered species, particular attention is given to the contemporary crisis in criminal justice, education, health, and employment as well as other issues such as stress and identy. Counseling strategies and resources are discussed.

African American Males in Counseling:

Who's Pulling the Trigger Now?

In the early years of the last decade, the plight of African American males was a hot topic. Literature and conference presentations abounded as counseling professionals wrestled with the growing crisis of homicide and incarceration. The flurry of activity led Kunjufu (1990) to remark that "never in the history of the African American male has he received so much attention. Black males have an excellent opportunity to take advantage of these organizations that offer mentoring, wisdom, academics, culture, entertainment, retreats, internships, college tuition, and employment" (p 21).

During that time, I headed two projects on this group. In 1993, I developed and taught a course on counseling African American men and in 1994; I facilitated an independent study course with a group of counseling students on the same topic. Our research and reflections culminated in a symposium bringing together the views of student researchers with community counselors and activists.

The beginning of this current project was an attempt to uncover how America lost interest in the plight of African American males and what has happened to them since. The main objective of the presentation was to revisit the literature and create discussion and reflection about their counseling needs. Hopefully, this second, third or fourth look for some will generate renewed community interest.

The zenith of national interest seemed to come at the point of the Million Man March in October 1995 when men came together from all over the country to create unity and support for the embattled group. That event sparked a hope that proved to be short

lived. According to Chris Booker (1998), the march movement faded into African American history leaving only the awareness that change is needed without any real direction or strategy.

At that point, the popular media seemed to lose interest in African American men and their dilemma. This drift may in part be attributed to the Kellogg Foundation National Task Force on African American Males which in 1992 asked the media to relent in the presentation of negative African American male images ("To Help Black Males," 1996). Clearly, there were many African American men who were achieving great strides at home as well as in community and national leadership roles (Bowman, 1989) and the media were asked to present these more positive images instead. As the crisis moved from the mainstream media, the struggles of African American men seemed to drop from view.

Unlike the popular media, there has been a slow but steady stream of professional literature focused on African American men going back more than fifteen years. The title of this presentation derived from a then popular article by Parham and McDavis (1987), "Black men, an endangered species: Who's really pulling the trigger". In that work, Parham echoed the notion that many societal and environmental factors had converged to create an atmosphere of risk for Black men.

Parham reported particular risk in areas such as life expectancy where African American men experienced a shorter life span blighted with more homicide and suicide. He stated that many youths would likely die before age twenty. In the area of health care, African American men faced more poor health and life threatening illness such as lung cancer. In the area of education, he reported an education gap between Blacks and whites

and a greater number of suspensions for longer periods for Blacks. Other issues included alcohol as a leading mental health problem as well as frustration and anger about the need for a 'dual identity' among African American men.

This article emerged at a propitious time when homicide had spiraled out of control and Washington DC was being called the Murder Capital of America. Parham and McDavis charged that despite an apparent commitment, the counseling literature had been slow to translate societal concerns into strategies for counseling Blacks more effectively (Parham & McDavis, 1987).

The Contemporary Crisis

Created in 1992, the Kellogg Foundation National Task Force on African American Males focused on strengthening African American men, families and communities (Christian Science Monitor, 1996). The Taskforce recommended:

- Instruction in entrepreneurship at the elementary and secondary school levels.
- Encouragement for the black churches and the black middle class to promote business development.
- Year round school with residential schools for boys.
- Youth camps established across the nation.
- More use of the library and family trips to historic black history destinations.
- A center, which would produce films, recordings and other media with positive African American male images.
- Establishment of a foundation to fund the recommendations.

Some of these recommendations were too impractical for immediate implementation, while others were tried with little meaningful result. Despite the National Task Force on African American Males, The Million Man March and numerous other efforts, the crisis seemed to worsen. For example, in 1992, 42% of young black men ages 18-35 in the District of Columbia were under criminal justice control. By 1997, the percentage of young black men under justice supervision had reached 50% or 24, 377 young men in Washington DC. In June 2000, 792,000 Black men were in US jails and prisons and by 2002, 11% of all African American males were in jail (Cose, 2002).

Today the prison industry is rapidly expanding to warehouse thousands of African American males. Some of this is due to the drug laws which, as they currently exist, are more likely to penalize this group. For example, the possession of crack cocaine most often associated with African Americans carries a stiffer penalty than possession of powder cocaine most often associated with White Americans (Johnson, Farrell and Stoloff, 1998; American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 1997). Han (1998) reported that although more whites use drugs, more blacks get arrested.

Interestingly, the rate of criminal activity may not be the only cause of the large criminal justice system. Han (1998) found that most arrests of African Americans stem from nonviolent acts and are based on the discretion of the officer. According to Johnson, Farrell and Stoloff (1998) the literature suggests that tougher crime control may result from the mere presence of minorities and the perceived threat of crime. They also add that once in the criminal justice system African American youths receive very different treatment than their white counterparts which often leads to more severe penalties.

Lotke (1997) states that the justice system may only compound the problems of beleaguered African American males who emerge from incarceration with more fear and mistrust than before. Prison, he suggests, may be a violent laboratory where males learn even less effective ways of coping. To compound the incarceration dilemma, the ACLU (1997) reported that voting rights have become a casualty in the war on drugs as 1 in 7 African American men is permanently disenfranchised because of a felony conviction. Currently, 10.4 million African American men have lost the right to vote because of a felony conviction. As a result, these men have lost a legitimate voice at the local, state and national level.

In the area of homicide, the rates among African American males began to increase dramatically after 1987 when Parham and McDavis sounded the alarm. According to Fox and Zawitz (n.d.), the rate at that time was 163 per 100,000 and peaked in 1993 at 347 per 100,000. Although homicide rates have declined nationally over the last decade, African American males age 18-24 years old continue to lead the nation with 205 per 100,000 homicides in 1999. Similarly, Cose (2002) reports that from 1980-1996, the suicide rate more than doubled among African American males age 15-19 years old.

In other areas of health, African American men have a rate of prostrate and lung cancer that is twice as high as that of their white counterparts (American Cancer Society, 1998). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC](1998), African American men also make up 35% of the reported diagnosed Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) cases and they sustain a higher percentage of coronary

artery disease, hypertension and stroke ("Health Statistics: Black Men's Health Crisis," n.d.).

In the area of education, African American males, more than any other group, are given to 'academic disidentification' meaning that they lose motivation to academically succeed and failure ceases to matter (Osborne as cited in "Study Shows African-American Males More Likely," 1997). In 1998, the U.S. Bureau of the Census (as cited in Davis, 1999) reported that 36% of all African Americans who were 25 years and older had not earned a high school diploma and African American males account for only 3.5% of the total enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities.

According to Johnson, Farrell and Stoloff (1998), black youth are "underrepresented in the gifted and talented or college bound tracks and over-represented in the vocational, general education and special education or non-college bound tracks" (p.5). Unsympathetic school policies and fewer dollars for education mean that African American youth who are often poorly educated and unemployable become derailed into the justice system.

In 1992, Lee reported that between 1976 and 1986 college enrollment for African American males declined from 35% to 28%. A 2002 report by the Justice Policy Institute states that over the last two decades, spending in the corrections system has drastically eclipsed spending for higher education. It is estimated that between 1980 and 2000, three times as many African American men were added to the prison system as were added to the rolls of colleges and universities ("Cellblocks or Classrooms?" n.d.).

Conceptualizing the Problem

Many African American males have enjoyed success in a variety of fields including agriculture, the sciences, sports, entertainment, and business as well as in the family and community arenas (McElroy and Andrews, 2000). It is to be noted though that these achievements have been made at some cost. Cose (2002) points out that "though this may be the best time ever to be a black man in America..., you only prosper if you make it through the gauntlet...Your best chance at life lies in rejecting what they – what much of America – tells you...of what it means to be black and male" (p.15).

This perspective takes the discussion to a place where African American males have a common struggle. While incarceration, education and health dilemmas have challenged many, still more have experienced discrimination in hiring and earnings, the stress of jobs that isolate and stereotype and racial profiling where African American males are stopped or detained because they are perceived as more likely to be committing a crime (Gallup News Service, 1999).

There are varied explanations regarding what happens to African American males in the crucible of struggle. For example, Kirk (as cited in Bonner, 1997) approaches the African American male dilemma from the perspective of power suggesting that a lack of empowerment "results in poor physical health, poor mental health, and destructive behaviors in the community" (p. 2). He further suggests that this inability to affect their lives often leads to depression and self-medication with drugs and alcohol.

Majors and Billson (1992) give credence to the same social factors in theorizing the 'cool pose', an adaptive mechanism, that has allowed African American men to create alternative routes to masculinity where society allowed them none. By remaining cool

under pressure and employing "unique patterns of speech, walk and demeanor" (p.2), African American men have been able to frustrate the objectives of people who oppose them.

Additionally, their detachment has served to alienate them from others leaving them often "emotionless, stoic, and unflinching" (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 5) not only with strangers but with intimates as well. For example, the complexity of communications has led to substantial strain in African American male-female relationships (Majors & Billson, 1992; Bethea, 1995). This strain, in the view of Majors and Billson, triggers a barrage of phenomena such as homicide, suicide, criminal activity and stress related illnesses. In the end, the cool pose serves to make the African American male strong, proud and visible – to the eye.

On the other hand, Franklin (1999) hypothesizes that as society continually fails to 'see' African American males realistically, they begin to become invisible. Sometimes they decide not to be themselves and become invisible to other African Americans as well. Overall, that feeling of invisibility leads to poor self-esteem and stunts personal growth.

Similarly, Lee and Bailey (1998) suggests that African American men are involved in a struggle to understand their role and the meaning of their existence in society. This ambivalence, he suggests, amounts to a psychosocial crisis. Again, the negative self-image leads to more stress and depression as well as greater involvement in behaviors that lead to incarceration and drug use. Hale (as cited in Bass & Coleman, 1997) has conceptualized this phenomena as 'personality dislocation' caused when ethnic minorities try to fit into several conflicting worlds. The determination that some

personality dislocation is needed to mesh the worlds may lead to internal struggle and loss self-esteem.

In viewing the role of the African American male in the workforce, Johnson, Farrell and Stoloff (1998) point out that not all residents from the inner city are antisocial or isolated and many do find work. In fact, many African Americans were selected out of the inner city for better jobs and lifestyles while others have been left behind. Many African American men earn significantly less and are more likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts (Lee & Bailey, 1998).

In an effort to understand the very high rate of unemployment in this group, Johnson et al. (1998) put forth four theories based on their review of relevant literature. First, they suggest the spatial isolation hypothesis that conceptualizes the problem as one of social and geographical isolation as poor uneducated African Americans are increasingly relegated to housing in the violent inner city and distanced from the jobs and prosperity of the suburbs. The disconnect between housing and jobs was compounded by the shift of American jobs overseas and the relaxation of hiring and retention policies at home.

Secondly, they suggest the cultural capital/employer preference hypothesis which holds that the problems of African American males are due to their own deficits of character and values. The proponents of this theory suggest the problems of African American males began in slavery and continue to the present nurtured in a social context where moral education is lacking and where a male is trained to be a vicious urban predator. Employers will likely choose not to hire a person who seems unmotivated to work and lacking in interpersonal relationship skills.

Thirdly, the search and destroy theory of Johnson et al. is the view to which they give most credence. This theory purports that African American males are targeted for discriminatory treatment in the labor market, educational arena and in the criminal justice system. Regardless of the skills these men possess, they are simply never selected for the job or training opportunity because they are African American. Instead, they are disproportionately selected for incarceration.

Finally, they offered the social capital hypothesis which explains the social isolation of African American males as a function of the economic restructuring and racial discrimination in the labor market and the housing market. Men who are not able to succeed are also unable to network to the outside world and so remain locked in the homogeneous environment of poverty.

Counseling Strategies

Many of the dilemmas faced by African American males cut across socioeconomic status and everyday stresses are compounded by the realities of race and class (Davis, 1999). Despite significant challenges, many do not seek counseling (Lee, 1999).

Lee and Bailey (1998) developed a guide to counseling African American males that is accessible through the American Counseling Association's ACAeNews on the web at www.counseling.org. They state that counseling for African American men should begin with an historical perspective that recognizes the negative experiences of African American men going back to slavery. The view of self, relationships and opportunities

in the wider society continue to be impacted (Bethea, 1995; Kunjufu, 1988; Majors and Billson, 1992).

Lee (1999) suggests that when counseling African American men counselors should:

- Develop rapport.
- Pace the counseling process beginning on a personal level.
- Prepare to self-disclose.
- Encourage introspection.
- Explore spirituality and the meaning of life and death.
- Be racism sensitive.
- Conduct psychoeducational counseling.

According to Lee and Bailey (1997), when counseling African American male youth, it is important to:

- Be developmental in nature – help clients to meet the development tasks that confront them.
- Provide for competent adult African American male resources as appropriate.
- Incorporate the strengths of black families – its historical strength, hard work, continuity, pride, and love.
- Incorporate African American and American culture.

Community Based Strategies

Kunjufu (1990) noted that many programs designed to support African American males need to provide outreach into the communities where they live. This observation supports the idea that counselors must recognize the importance of direct client services

as well as advocate for the client in direct or indirect ways in the community. This approach, developed by Lewis and Lewis (1998), hinges on the fact that societal or environmental factors often impact the client beyond his or her ability and willingness to change. The most effective community counselor is not just in the community but of the community as well and involved in the lives of clients beyond the office walls.

Given the many factors impacting the lives of African American men, the advocacy of the counselors could be invaluable. For example, a counselor could initiate a study of African American men in a given community or geographic location. There are a number of web-sites initiated by cities which have formed commissions on the study of the African American male. One example is the Indianapolis Commission on African American Males investigating the areas of employment, family, criminal justice, health and education.

Counselors could work to reduce the number of black males consumed by the routine operation of the criminal justice system. According to Lotke (1997), "every black man in prison is a black man without a regular job, every black man who has been arrested is a black man with a criminal record, and every black man paying court costs for his own prosecution has less to spend on his children and family" (p.4). This strategy, of necessity, will address the other aspects of the contemporary crisis of the African American male.

Counselor education programs need to train culturally competent counselors of every race or ethnic group and commit to the recruitment and training of African American counselors in particular. There is substantial evidence that African American males under use mental health services (Lee, 1999) possibly because African American

therapists are underrepresented in the counseling field. In many cases, the African American client preferred the African American male counselor.

Finally, counselors and community organizations could revisit the male bonding groups that were so popular in the past decade (Ghee, Walker & Younger, 1997; Lee, 1992). Younger males and adults alike continue to need the mentoring and support that the groups are intended to provide but there is no quick fix. These groups will be effective only to the level of the commitment to them.

Conclusion

The charges made by Parham and McDavis more than a decade ago seem to still ring true. Socially, many African American males have been abandoned. Far from being able to resolve these issues on an individual basis, they continue mired in environmental constraints. As the statistics continue to grow more grim, the need to serve this population becomes more urgent. All of the strategies discussed can be effective when applied in the counseling process and in the community but they must be applied.

Yet, there is cause for optimism. As Cose (2002) states, African American males "stand nearly seventeen million strong, an ever-growing extended family of black boys and men. We are far too resilient and much too entrenched for the word 'endangered' to apply" (p. 17). Counseling clearly has a place in this struggle.

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